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ABSTRACT

The study presented was conducted to examine potential relationships between attitudes regarding the dying process, including acceptance of euthanasia, and other attitudinal or demographic attributes. The data of the survey was comprised of responses given by 331 respondents to a door-to-door interviewer. Results are discussed in terms of preferred cause of death and preferred duration of the dying process. (YFJ/Author)

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Euthanasia Acceptance: An Attitudinal Inquiry

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With a heightened interest in the topic of death, increased attention has also been given to the manner in which one dies. This study was conducted to examine potential relationships between attitudes regarding the dying process, including acceptance of euthanasia, and other attitudinal or demographic attributes.

Expressed belief in an afterlife has previously been found to be related to a preference for death by natural causes. Both philosophical (Alexander & Alderstein, 1965) and anthropological studies indicate a belief that transition into an afterlife is adversely affected by accidental or other unnatural forms of death. In this study, both natural and accidental death were posed as hypothetical situations involving immediate death. This was done to avoid confusing dying duration with the natural-accidental dimension. The relationship between belief in an afterlife and preferred duration of death was assessed by asking a separate question concerning duration.

Since belief in an afterlife is presumed to be related to a preference for death by natural causes, it was also expected that belief in an afterlife would result in a rejection of euthanasia. Acceptance versus rejection of euthanasia was also examined with respect to: a) belief in an afterlife, preferred duration of death, and c) the age of respondents. It was expected that euthanasia acceptance would be related to: a) belief in an afterlife, b) preference for a sudden versus slow death (since euthanasia assures speed), and c) younger subjects. Also the potential for conditional acceptance of euthanasia was examined by comparing euthanasia acceptance under two conditions of decision

control.

Finally, it was expected that respondents preferring a sudden death were likely to be younger.

Method

The predictions were assessed with information gained from an attitude survey. The data from this survey were comprised of responses given by 331 respondents to a fixed-schedule interview given door-to-door interview in the community of Lubbock, Texas. Responses were collected by 25 trained interviewers. Of all persons approached, 13 per cent refused to participate. Another eight per cent of the data were unusable due to interviewer error, leaving the information from 331 respondents. Residences for the door-to-door interviewing were selected using a combination of cluster and interval sampling. The person answering the door was asked for his/her cooperation if that individual was at least 18 years of age. The method of data analysis chosen to test the relationships was Chi Square.

Results

The acceptance versus rejection of euthanasia (passive) was independent of preference for natural versus accidental death, $\chi^2(1) = 1.996$, n.s.

Acceptance of euthanasia was found to coincide with disbelief in an afterlife, $\chi^2(1) = 6.981$, $p .01$.

Euthanasia was disproportionately accepted by younger subjects, $\chi^2(1) = 8.091$, $p .01$.

A disproportionate number of respondents approving of the general concept of passive euthanasia removed their approval when euthanasia decision-making control was shifted from patient to relatives, $\chi^2(1) = 59.473$, $p .001$.

Acceptance versus rejection of euthanasia was independent of preference for slow versus sudden death, $\chi^2(1) = 0.227$, n.s.

Belief in an afterlife coincided with preference for death by natural, as opposed to accidental causes, $\chi^2(1) = 6.590$, $p .01$.

Belief in an afterlife was not related to preference for slow versus sudden death, $\chi^2(1) = 0.970$, n.s.

Preference for slow versus sudden death was not related to the respondents' young or older age, $\chi^2(1) = 0.116$, n.s.

Discussion

Preferred cause of death and preferred duration of death should be treated as separate concepts. While the former was found to be related to belief in an afterlife, the latter was not. Further, neither concept was related to acceptance of euthanasia.

Euthanasia acceptance was found to be related to disbelief in an afterlife, contrary to expectations. Perhaps a reliance on a secular solution, euthanasia, to moral dilemmas requires a secular philosophy. Euthanasia acceptance was found disproportionately more in younger subjects, for whom the notion is probably less threatening. Yet shifts in euthanasia decision control dramatically increase the potential threat of the procedure for subjects overall. Nearly half of those who approved the general concept of euthanasia removed approval when relatives would make the decision.

Finally, the preferred duration of death was found to be independent of the respondent's age.

This study has examined relationships among several attitudes concerning death and dying, including attitudes regarding euthanasia. In that euthanasia legalization is beginning to occur, much more need to be known about the dynamics of euthanasia acceptance.

References

- Alexander, I.E., & Alderstein, A.M. Death and religion. In H. Feifel Ed.), The meaning of death. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965.